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by HOPKINSON BILL

Source:

SYMBOLON (SYMBOLON), issue: 1 / 2011, pages: 73-77, on [www.ceeol.com](http://www.ceeol.com).

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## THE FEAR OF FORGETTING WHO WE ARE: MASKS, IDENTITY AND THE NEW ERA IN THE PLAYS OF KAITE O'REILLY

**Bill HOPKINSON**

Department of Performing Arts, Edge Hill University, UK

[Bill.Hopkinson@edgehill.ac.uk](mailto:Bill.Hopkinson@edgehill.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** The Fear of Forgetting Who We Are: Masks, Identity and the New Era in the Plays of Kaite O'Reilly

*In her plays O'Reilly is concerned with fundamental manipulations of Personae, in the Greek sense of 'Masks', as the site where identity resides in performative terms. In the wider world when we our 'masks' slip, for whatever reason, we experience a crisis often manifest in violence or loss. Drawing principally on her plays Henhouse (2005) and a recent adaptation of Aeschylus' The Persians (2010), this paper proposes a theatre metaphor for the post-1989 era where individual identities and their racial national and tribal co-relates become Masks of History. Whether these 'Masks' are 'worn' voluntarily or under coercion the transformation is essentially psychophysical. Though ideologically created, these masks can be seen as memes. When expressed through the body they offer the playwright a tool to transcend narrowly individualistic character writing. Thus the stage is populated with dramatis personae which embody our uncertainties in the post-1989 era.*

**Keywords:** masks, Kaite O'Reilly, post-1989, *Henhouse*, Aeschylus.

Kaite O'Reilly is a British playwright of Irish descent, who for more than a decade has been writing for stages across Europe. In a number of her plays O'Reilly is concerned with a fundamental manipulation of *Personae*, in the Greek sense of 'Masks', as the site where our identities reside in performative terms. When we lose these masks for some reason we experience a crisis which manifests itself in violence. This paper proposes a theatre metaphor for the post-1989 era in which individual identities and their collective (racial, national, tribal) co-relates are once again in flux.

Most recently O'Reilly's adaptation of Aeschylus' *The Persians* (2010) has offered a postmodern aesthetic for current events. This most ancient of 'war plays' was staged in a British Ministry of Defence training 'village' where urban warfare techniques are more usually rehearsed. Known as Cileni, it takes its name from a nearby river, and perhaps recalls the ancient Celtic Galician warrior tribe of the same name. A pun may also be perceived: *kill any*. This ghost town, an alien imposition on the mountains of Wales, with its high-gabled roofs looks like no other Welsh village instead it recalls the settlements of Germany and Central Europe. This is not the first time O'Reilly has concerned herself with the threat of war in Europe. In very different ways *Peeling* (2002) and *Henhouse* (2004) examine the conflicts of the post-1989 era.

In 2004 I directed the first production of her play *Henhouse* (2004), in it, loosely set against the background of a civil conflict, she defines her warring characters in terms of their conceptions of historical time: as a series of unconnected moments; as cyclical recurrence; as progress; and as the simultaneous co-existence of all the above. This co-existence of 'primitive', classical, progressive modern and 'simultaneous' historical time is inspired by the Poetics of the Nobel prize-winning Mexican Surrealist poet Octavio Paz. I suggest that these conceptions of time might be called Masks of History, worn willingly or unwillingly by the subjects of that history. Shomit Mitter's description of the mechanism of the mask is pertinent here: "what takes place is not the deliberate concealment of an existing identity but the involuntary obliteration of that identity through the physical incapacity of the body to express it. Actors lose their self-consciousness not because they are aware of being protected by the mask. They do so because, when their faces are concealed, they no longer possess the practical means by which to be 'themselves'. By the same measure the soul, far from being 'laid bare', is possessed to feel only what the mask reflects. As it does so, the actor 'recognises' the character and thereby confirms his/her sense of its 'rightness' - as though it conformed to some previously imagined pattern... it is as if posture is an objective correlative of a person's state of being" (Mitter, 1992, 18-19).

Whether social 'Masks' are 'worn' voluntarily or under coercion, the manner in which national, tribal and individual identities are ideologically created is too large a subject for this paper. But in their expression they can be seen as memes which offer the playwright a tool to transcend narrowly individualistic character writing in order to people the stage with a *dramatis personae* which can represent slippages of identity. These *dramatis personae* inform a post 1989 politics of uncertainty and which are the primary concern of this truly European playwright. In O'Reilly's 2004 play *Henhouse*, a farmer and his wife sit in silence:

He looks at her hands. She becomes aware of his scrutiny.

Mary: I do have to hold them in my lap otherwise they'd be up, looking for something to do.

Hugh: Finding mischief, ha?

She does not respond. Silence. They listen to it. (O'Reilly, 2004, 19)

The text of Kaite O'Reilly's play *Henhouse* is overtly a physical score. Rarely, if ever, do characters sit and talk without *looking for something to do*, this concatenation of action defines the 'play' of the play: listening to a record, making tea, embroidering a cloth, making bread, more tea, shaving, washing hair, tying a man up, watching tv, plucking a chicken, brushing hair, mending a chair, setting the table, eating dinner, clearing the table, doing a crossword, peeling potatoes, fixing the sink, shooting the horse, reading the paper, making a birthday cake, taming a bird, storytelling, dancing, dying: this was the physical journey of the play. In her introductory notes, the playwright makes it clear that "although all the characters in the play are a 'family' - this is not made specific or explicit through the play. By the end of the piece, it should be apparent that this random group of people are related. It is important in the production that the actors clearly play each scene and action on its own terms and without reference to their role within this 'family', so that the relationships between these characters remain open to interpretation until the close" (O'Reilly, 2004, 12).

This mask of family descends slowly over the bodies of the actors. There is a sense in which they begin in Neutrality, a place of multiple possibilities but also a place of absence. For the play is told in a reverse chronology in an unnamed civil war where we see the results of trauma gradually dissolve back towards the family unit. O'Reilly draws on personal experience. For six years she volunteered for the Suncocret Humanitarian Relief Organisation in former Yugoslavia. She says in her introduction to the published edition of *Henhouse*: "through the civil war during Operation Storm, and then through the painful years of post-war reconstruction, we worked with children and adults experiencing severe post-traumatic disorders...(this) was a time of stasis, an exhausted drawing of breath. I also remember the reckoning: a dull recounting of atrocities and crimes before recovery could begin" (O'Reilly, 2004, 5). How can we play this stasis? A contemporary place of abjection akin the world of the ancient dramatists. In our rehearsals in London half a decade ago, Mask offered direct access to a movement quality, complexes of embodied internal and external rhythms. Palettes of mask energies provided an accelerated way to introduce, an embodied vocabulary which has at its heart a shift of rhythm or a movement quality rather than a reason to be. Stanislavski was well aware of this possibility in his work on rhythm. "The correctly established tempo-rhythm of a play or a role, can of itself, intuitively (on occasion automatically) take hold of the feelings of an actor and arouse in him a true sense of living his part...Our will is directly affected by the super-objective, by other objectives, by a through line of action: our feelings are directly worked upon by tempo-rhythm" (Stanislavski, 1988, 244).

O'Reilly demanded *that each action be played on its own terms* (O'Reilly, 2004, 12), this challenged key relationships within the actor's task. Perhaps the effects of prolonged exposure to war that are dramatised in the play sap the will and create the kind of anomie familiar from Beckett (an influence noted in critical responses to the play). But to leave it at this would be to reduce the play from a meditation on the stuff that makes us who we are to a more limited exercise in naturalistically portraying post-traumatic stress disorder:

Mary: Look at you there, turning her brains to jam.

Mary tries ruffling her hair, Young Woman pushes her off.

Young Woman: I hate that.

Mary: You and your children's stories.

Old Man: It's part of her culture, her heritage. If she doesn't know that, how will she recognise herself?

Mary: By looking in the Mirror. Call your Father (O'Reilly, 2004, 77).

Rather, O'Reilly offers an exploration of what makes us who we are, the paradoxes that constitute the embodiment of Self. In the final images of *Henhouse* the unnamed Young Woman is blindfolded (the simplest of masks) to dance through dark space towards her birthday cake. This is masking in the sense of a ritual dance like those associated with liminal times of the year throughout Europe. It is a rebirth not unlike the Neutral Mask experience, but here identification is made through the act of wishing. She speaks about her desire to be other: "I always wished to be someone else when it was my turn...Then one day I woke up and it had happened. I don't wish now" (O'Reilly, 2004, 55). Unmasked, Young Woman crosses the threshold into a world changed by Young Man pointing a gun, expressing the will (to power). "She blows out the candles. Blackout. The sound of distant artillery" (O'Reilly, 2004, 78).

O'Reilly attempts to move fluidly between the different masks we all wear: the individual and the collective, the personal and the political, encapsulating a feminist reading of the fluidity of Selfhood. The mother, "Mary does what

she always has, what she always does, an ancient thing her forebears did and perhaps those who will come after her... They are peasant things, basic human things, about tending and husbandry and care... taking the old man out to piss, feeding and cleaning (the) young man – as my mother would say about neglect or being inhuman/inhumane: *you wouldn't treat a dog like that, yet alone a human being*... Mary's identity lies there in these integral actions (which are essentially about life and death, growth or being barren) and without them she is dead physically and spiritually... and so is the world dead or at least sterile... Mary is keeping the world going in the midst of this madness and tragedy, by physically tending, but also keeping the faith in the natural world and order of things" (O'Reilly, 2004ii). This too is a rhythm, it is cyclical, agrarian, peasant: her feet are in the mud. We recognise the movement quality, the mask. It is a kind of grace: and Grace is nearer to Pleasure than to Will, there is an ease about it. Both are attributed to God, but Grace may be closer to the feminine principle. Grace in both its senses: action which is without neurosis, without anything unnecessary, which is therefore graceful, almost dance. And this circular movement of Grace is return and redemption, in the playwright's words: *faith, trust, revolve, renewal* (O'Reilly, 2004ii).

Mary (and to a lesser extent her husband Hugh) inhabit a temporal realm in which the cycle of the seasons dominates, they are peasants and struggle to come to terms with 'progress' although Hugh embraces technology in a backward-looking way, he is progressive. In working with the playwright on the first production, she reminded me of conversations we had had when the play was being written regarding the cultural construction of time. I first came across them in the writings of Octavio Paz but they have their roots in Durkheim and in Hegel. "Old Man inhabits PRIMITIVE TIME – he deals with fables and superstitions, things not scientific or known – Primitive Time is lived in the now, in the moment (hence that scene when he walks across the kitchen, ignoring the debate, and gets himself a glass of water – and stares with deep satisfaction at the field outside – he is satisfying an immediate need (thirst) and focusing on what sustains him). Primitive time is often best shown in children – they exist in the now – their immediate physical experience is paramount – he is there, talking in fragments when we first see him – almost like Alzheimer's – a return to the childhood, a regression to the immediate" (O'Reilly, 2004ii). Those losses she has explored in her play about brain-damage and memory impairment: *The Almond and the Seahorse* (O'Reilly, 2008).

It was therefore appropriate to explore archetypal elements of Child and Clown in the construction of the Old Man's character. For Paz, "the handiwork of primitive peoples" reveals the "time before time" (Paz, 1974, 23). What is this time like? "It is almost impossible to describe it in words and concepts. I would call it the original metaphor... a life that will unfold only in the future yet is also already present... it is the imminence of the unknown - not as a presence but as an expectation as a threat, as an emptiness. It is the breaking through of the *now* into the *here*, the present in all its instantaneous actuality and all its dizzying, hostile potentiality. What is this moment concealing? The present is both revealed and concealed in the handiwork of the primitive, as in the seed or the mask: it is both what is and what is not, the presence that both is and is not there before us. This present never occurs in historical or linear time, nor does it occur in religious or cyclical time... it is the time previous to *before* and *after*" (Paz, 1974, 23).

This original and originary metaphor reminds us again of the Neutral Mask experience, here however instead of connecting (in the moment) with the innate rest-and-repose response it tips us into the fight-or-flight reflex. In *Henhouse* it is absolutely appropriate that it is the Old Man who presages the arrival of the hostile unknown, bearer of bloodied feathers, blindfolds and tales of "the little folk, the unexpected, the vicious, violent invisible forces which can pounce if you displease them" (O'Reilly, 2004ii). But it is the Young Man who brings destruction home, for "Young Man is in MODERN TIME – a time of science, of beliefs and absolutes – often linear – usually represented by totalitarianism" (O'Reilly, 2004ii). In working on this role which the playwright felt was *unplayable*, mask played a different role, permitting physical shifts akin to the jump cuts of film editing (the medium of modernity), and the creation of a physicalised mask persona with a touch of the death mask, the stillness of the cinematic hero and the frozen trauma of the Vietnam Vets photographed by Don McCullin. An exploration of counter-mask created a montage of complexity, when, for instance, he is accepting soup meekly from the Young Woman while recounting the atrocities he has committed. Young Man offers a linear account of his history for he is the instrument of *progress*, literally burning the past: "It was after the last time, that's when I - the four of us - used kerosene. Old fashioned." (O'Reilly, 2004, 41) For Paz "modernity and progress resemble each other in that both are the products of a view of time as rectilinear" (Paz, 1974, 20). But Modern Time can encompass both Primitive Time and Classical Time within its narrative, for the primitive, the function of the mask is to reveal and conceal a terrible, contradictory reality: the seed that is life and death, fall and resurrection in a fathomless *now*. Today the mask hides nothing. In our time it may well be impossible for the artist to invoke presence. But another way, cleared for him by Mallarmé, is still open to him: manifesting absence, incarnating emptiness" (Paz, 1974, 27).

*Henhouse* explores this possibility through a growing awareness of the absence of the Young in the first scene, their namelessness when they arrive in subsequent (chronologically earlier) scenes, and in the futile ploughing of a

field when there is no seed. Most notably the war itself is absent from the play, only the absence of chickens in the henhouse reveals its presence as the *now* breaks through into the *here* of Mary and Hugh's reality. The *unplayable* task for the actor embodying the Young Man was to "manifest absence, incarnate emptiness" (O'Reilly, 2004ii), as impossible as finding the Neutral. Writing on Pound and Eliot's eclecticism, Paz considers that by "incorporating texts from other times and other languages in their works, these poets believed that ... they were being modern; their time was a *summa* of all times. But what they were really doing was taking the first step towards the destruction of modernity" (Paz, 1974, 21). Post 1989 we see the crisis of Modernity writ large.

Young Woman, like the play, offers a criticism of *progress*: "she can value equally the spatio-temporal worlds of the Old Man and of Hugh and Mary, and understand and participate in the Young Man's hopes and aspirations for the future. "Mary and (less so) Hugh are in CLASSICAL TIME – agriculture, the force of the seasons, the round of the sun setting and rising – their scope is within this natural cycle (as opposed to this exact precise second, for Old Man)" (O'Reilly, 2004ii). But Primitive, Classical and Modern ideas of time are all contained within *Henhouse*. "A synchronic vision is replacing the former diachronic vision of art" (Paz, 1974, 21), and this is the nature too of the wider vision which is before us. "POSTMODERN TIME – when all of these times, above, can exist simultaneously - acknowledging nothing is fixed, secure – like the feminist notion of the individual, it's not a fixed thing, but shifting, multiple roles and dynamics dependant on who you are with (a daughter, a lover, a mother...etc). Hence, she often has different dynamics and interactions – different selves – according to who she's interacting with" (O'Reilly, 2004ii). These are the fluid masks the young woman wears. This placed particular demands on the actor playing Young Woman. In rehearsal the embodiments of Hugh and Mary borrowed elements of the maskwork to create a reverse aging process as the play progressed, she was required to find multiple transformations within a scene, which could only be hung on shifts of centre, and rapid appropriations of Mask, most notably in the return from fragmentation to a younger self which still had to have echoes of the future we had just witnessed. Hers was the most overtly non-psychological process in rehearsal: she was an ex-student of mine and therefore had the trust to step away from established and familiar working processes to a greater extent than did the other actors. Explorations of Clown as a kind of cleansing mask proved very useful, as did archetypes of Trickster, Child and Huntress in exploring the rapid changes of focus between Young Man and Hugh: the need to pass between their respective worlds, crossing and re-crossing the threshold finally to "come home bristled, bleeding from wounds" with the discovery that: "it's not even your pain" (O'Reilly, 2004, 57) but rather a mask of someone else's pain. This is the place of the mask, of borrowed identities and identification with the Other that are temporary for the actor but which have become all too real for too many: the mask that can no longer be removed. We have named these symptoms post-traumatic stress disorder but it is an ancient thing.

The danger for the practitioner is that, as Paz says: "imitation becomes mere repetition, the dialogue ceases and tradition petrifies" (Paz, 1974, 19). "There is no one centre. Time has lost its former coherence: East and West, yesterday and tomorrow exist as a confused jumble in each one of us...different times and different spaces are combined in a here and now that is everywhere at once" (Paz, 1974, 21). To echo the British Mask teacher John Wright speaking of the process of maskwork, this is "not an analysis but an improvisation" (Wright CD 3, Track 5, 2'10").

O'Reilly says of that first extant play by Aeschylus: "it is extraordinary, as an Athenian, to write from the point of view of the defeated – it could have been written from the point of view of the victorious. There is such power and pathos in the play: compassion, generosity, humility" (O'Reilly in Higgins, 2010). That we all need reminding that we share a common humanity is not a new thought: that the site of this humanity is a culturally constructed body is perhaps an insight of postmodernity. Concepts of the human are many and varied but 'the primitive' site of this humanity would seem to lie in the soul or spirit, however conceived, either as divine essence or as a re-incarnated soul or re-born ancestor. That was the mask *then*. Meanwhile the journey towards modernity has located the site of the human in the unique mind. But as the metaphysics crumbles under philosophical assault, we have resorted to the physics, the mechanics of the body, we all share the same skeleton, and difference is only a question of DNA, a variation of less than 3%. And this is a Mask of Neutrality.

Derrida and others have attempted to inscribe the body as a site for language, fragmenting it as though it is a sentence to be taken apart, and yet *it moves*: the experiential evidence compels us onward to find something more. Edward Bond's uncomfortable compromise that *we cannot willingly give up the name of human*, suggests that the suitcase can never be completely unpacked, binding the acquisition of Self with the acquisition of language, and yet acknowledging that they are not exactly the same thing. Writing in the moment of the late sixties the poet Paz hopes for a new art to heal the fractures, one "which will demand of the reader and the listener the sensitivity and the imagination of a performer...The works of the new time that is aborning will not be based on the idea of linear succession but on the idea of combination... (of) languages, spaces and times" (Paz, 1973, 21).

For O'Reilly, the woman of the theatre, writing now in words, in spaces and in actions, we are unwilling performers confronted with a series of ill-fitting masks, the wearing of which stress our bodies beyond endurance. If we can cast them off a paradigm shift awaits us: not only in the theatre but in the spaces between us.

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